

# *A Half Century of Professionalism:* **The U.S. Army School of the Americas**

*by Joseph C. Leuer*

Most accounts place the birth of the U.S. Army School of the Americas (USARSA) in 1946 to coincide with the end of WWII and the signing of the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance (the “Rio Treaty”) the following year. However, deeper research reveals that the U.S. Army Caribbean School (USARCARIB School), inaugurated on February 1, 1949, in response to the implementation of the Truman Doctrine as the primary pillar of U.S. foreign policy throughout the newly-established bipolar world, is the true father of the modern USARSA. The U.S. Army Caribbean Command created the USARCARIB School by consolidating four of the loosely connected training schools that were initially designed to train U.S. military personnel stationed in the Panama Canal Zone in the rigors of operating in a tropical environment.

Since its creation, USARSA has acted as an important cog in the complex workings of U.S. foreign policy in the Latin American region. The school’s role has been to support the strategic goal of a hemisphere at peace within a collective security system. It has achieved this by serving as a forum for intra-regional military dialog as well as a center for professionalizing and influencing the region’s developing military leaders through education in U.S. military doctrine and by exposing them to the U.S. Army’s value-based model. In the early 1960’s, the school gained an additional duty that has served to define its controversial historical legacy. USARSA was tasked to act as the integrated training center for the warriors who fought the hot wars that spilled into the Central and South American regions as a result of the East-West ideological competition of the Cold War—a mission successfully executed by the thousands of U.S. and Latin American military personnel who passed through the school, but one that ultimately led to the closure of USARSA at the culmination of the century as a result of defamatory allegations that it served to inspire criminal conduct by its graduates. Here is the story:

## *Foundation and Growth (1946-1960):*

The 1823 Monroe Doctrine and later the Roosevelt Corollary defined U.S. political and military involvement in Latin America for more than a century. In 1849, interest in Latin America grew when east-coast treasure hunters rushed to California across the Isthmus of Panama. A U.S.-built railroad was completed in 1855 to move the increasing number of people and goods while drawing the two regions even closer. National political and military interests were added when the *USS Nipsic* sailed from New York in 1870 to begin surveying a possible route for the construction of an inter-oceanic canal.<sup>1</sup> The U.S. victory over Spain in 1898 announced the emergence of a new world power and started the U.S. military on nation-building projects in Cuba and Puerto Rico. Continuous U.S. military presence on the narrow isthmus uniting Central and South America began in 1903. In November of that year, Panama declared independence from the nation of Colombia under the watchful eye of U.S. troops stationed aboard a flotilla headed by the *USS Nashville* moored outside the key port city of Colon.<sup>2</sup> The implicit guarantee embodied in the flotilla’s presence resulted in the Hay-Bunau Varilla Treaty between the new republic and the United States, allowing the U.S. wide latitude in constructing a canal through the jungles of Panama. During the next century, a U.S.-controlled Canal Zone would be created, an inter-oceanic canal would be built, and the U.S. military would establish a hemispheric presence radiating from its bases carved out of the tropical Panamanian landscape.

The U.S. Caribbean Defense Command (CDC) was charged with defending the Panama Canal upon its completion in 1914, requiring the establishment of training centers and curricula to teach U.S. forces the rigors of jungle warfare. The U.S. Army element of the CDC, the Panama Mobile Force (PMF), quickly became the expert in jungle operations and, in 1943, was tasked by the War Department to train 1500 replacements for the Pacific Theater of Operations.<sup>3</sup> Thus began a long history of professional training conducted by the U.S. military in the jungles of the crossroads of the Americas.



At the end of WWII, the CDC was replaced by the U.S. Army Caribbean (USARCARIB) Command. The G3, known as the operations cell of USARCARIB, ran the military school system in the Canal Zone. From 1946 to 1947, the Latin American Training Center—Ground Division was created primarily to train U.S. personnel. However, the center did allow Panamanian and other Latin American militaries to enroll in special courses taught in Spanish. In 1948, the Latin American Ground School replaced the center and expanded the mission to provide training to officers and soldiers of the Armies of the Latin American nations in order to supplement and assist in the training directed by the U.S. Military Missions. Only professional soldiers were accepted for training; the school did not allow recent recruits or members of local militias.<sup>4</sup>

The Latin American Ground School was headquartered at Fort Amador on the Pacific side of the Canal Zone (CZ). The school conducted an Instructor Course for its faculty and divided its other course offerings between three training departments. The Department of Communications taught the Radio Maintenance and Transmission Chiefs Courses, which were both 22 weeks in duration. The Department of Weapons and Tactics taught the 4-week Basic Infantry Tactics and the Infantry and Cavalry Heavy Weapons Courses, along with an 8-week Basic Weapons Course. The Department of Engineers taught the 16-week Basic Engineer Course.<sup>5</sup>

A network of three affiliated schools offered additional courses. The Food Service School, located at Fort Clayton, CZ, offered 4-week courses for the mess sergeant, the mess-hall officer, and the food supervisor. An 8-week Cooks' Course was also part of the curriculum. The Medical School, also at Fort Clayton, CZ, offered two 26-week Spanish-language courses in general medicine and in general surgery. Additionally, 12-week courses, offered in English, and made available to language-qualified Latin American students included the Orthopedic Surgery Course, X-Ray Course, Genital-Urinary Surgery Course, Cardiology Course, Neuro-Psychiatric Course, and the Medic Course. The third school to offer training under the rubric of the Latin American Ground Center was the Motor Mechanics' School, located at Fort Gulick on the Atlantic side of the Canal Zone. This school offered one 16-week course for automobile and truck mechanics.<sup>6</sup> The Latin American Ground School operated until February 1, 1949 when international accords created the need for change.

During the height of WWII, the U.S. military invested \$13,327,911.00 developing Fort Gulick (originally known as Mount Hope Military Reservation) with \$1,960,618.00 programmed to construct Building 400 for use as a military hospital for the recovery of wounded veterans of the European conflict.<sup>7</sup> By the end of 1948, the requirements for such a large and diversified hospital waned and the building was vacated by medical personnel, but not abandoned. Under the leadership of Maj. Gen. Ray E. Porter (the Commander of the USARCARIB Command) and in the spirit of the newly-minted Rio Treaty and the chartering of the Organization of American States (OAS), the dispersed assets of the Latin American Ground School were consolidated into the renamed USARCARIB School. The school's headquarters was moved from the Pacific side at Fort Amador to Fort Gulick on the Atlantic side of the Canal Zone.<sup>8</sup> The newly consolidated USARCARIB School occupied the vacated Building 400, which was located on a beautiful peninsula surrounded by the crystalline waters of Lake Gatun.

The early commandants of the USARCARIB School fulfilled several roles. In addition to running the school, they served as the Fort Gulick post commander and as the Atlantic side representative of the commanding general. The USARCARIB School's curriculum remained similar to that of the past, but added new courses such as the Command and General Staff Course and a course for military police officers and noncommissioned officers.<sup>9</sup> The school continued to train U.S. military personnel as well as selected students from all the Spanish-speaking countries of the Western Hemisphere. However, as the years progressed and the Inter-American System was solidified, the desire of the Latin American militaries to associate with the U.S. military and learn U.S. doctrine be-



*USS Iowa transist the Canal.*

gan to take priority over the English-language instruction offered to U.S. military personnel stationed in the Canal Zone. The U.S. Army and the Department of State recognized the importance of promoting military-to-military relationships among all nations of the hemisphere, the shortfalls in the professional qualities of many of the region's militaries, and the desire of the Latin Americans to receive professional military education and training in their own language. On April 21, 1956, the U.S. Army approved a request from the USARCARIB Command to cease English-language training and establish Spanish as the official language of the USARCARIB School. By 1958, the USARCARIB School had graduated roughly an equal number of Latin American and U.S. personnel: 7,378 vs. 7,985, respectively.<sup>10</sup>

In 1957-58, the USARCARIB School was commanded by Col. Gines Pérez under the direction of Maj. Gen. Thomas L. Harrold, the Commanding General of U.S. Army Caribbean Command and his assistant, Brig. Gen. Milton L. Ogden. The school was divided into three major departments, each with its appropriate course offerings. The Tactics Department taught six professional military-education courses: the Command and General Staff Course, Military Police Officer Course, Infantry Tactics Course, Enlisted Military Police Course, Artillery Officer Basic Course, and the Cadet Course. The Weapons and Mortars Depart-

ment taught the Mortar Officer Course and the Small-Caliber Weapons Repair Course. The Technical Department taught an Engineer Basic and Engineer Officer Course, a Communications Chief Course, a Radio and Operator Course, as well as a Wheeled-Vehicle Mechanics Course.<sup>11</sup>



*Vehicle maintenance training at the USARCARIB School.*



*Social events enriched the experience of the students.*



*Pontoon bridge building on Lake Gatun.*